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# Reading is fundamental -- to the family's happiness

By David G. Allan, CNN

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## Story highlights

Parents reading aloud to children improves the quality of their relationships, research shows

Many parents stop reading to their kids once they are able to read themselves, even when the kids don't want to stop

child (even after they can do so themselves). We were disappointed but respected her agency.

When she was a toddler, we began a nearly daily ritual called Milk & Books. It quickly became the best part of any ordinary day as we devoured picture and chapter books that ranged from hilarious Shel Silverstein poetry to the dramatic prairie recollections of Laura Ingalls Wilder. Some titles came from authors prevalent in our own childhoods (E.B. White, Roald Dahl, Virginia Lee Burton, Dr. Seuss, Kay

**Editor's Note:** *Go Ask Your Dad* is parenting advice with a philosophical bent as one dad explores what we want out of life, for ourselves and our children, through useful paradigms and best practices. Share your insight at the [CNN Parenting Facebook page](#).

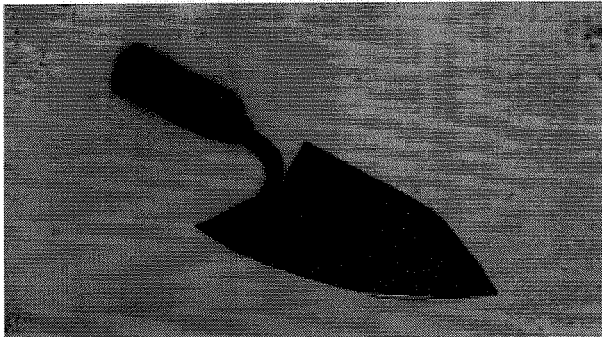
**(CNN)** — A couple of years ago, when my older daughter was 8, she gently told my wife and me that she'd gotten too old for us to read her books anymore. We didn't try to talk her out of it or numerate the many benefits of reading aloud to a

Thompson), and more came from the ever-growing list of contemporary greats (Mo Willems, Jon Muth, Kate DiCamillo, and Andrew Clements).

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Go Ask Your Dad is parenting advice with a philosophical bent as one dad explores what we want out of life, for ourselves and our children, through useful paradigms and best practices. It considers old problems in new ways, and new problems that previous generations didn't face.



When our daughter declared that she'd outgrown our family ritual, I suspected that a classmate made her self-conscious about it, perhaps one whose parents had done away with reading books to them. But I didn't ask her why she wanted to stop or reveal my sadness. She loves reading, so maybe our work was done, I thought. And I consoled myself with the notion that I had years of happy memories with her and more good years of M&B left with her little sister.

Two weeks after stopping our bedtime readings, though, my older daughter asked whether we could start again. She simply enjoyed the ritual too much to let it go yet. As she later explained, "Everyone likes to be read to, even adults." We've continued uninterrupted since. Right now, we're deep into Philip Pullman's "The Golden Compass."

The value of reading to our kids -- for them and us -- is reinforced by the growing body of research on the topic. Just last week, a meta-analysis of 19 studies published in the journal *Pediatrics* found that reading aloud was significantly beneficial to children and their parents.

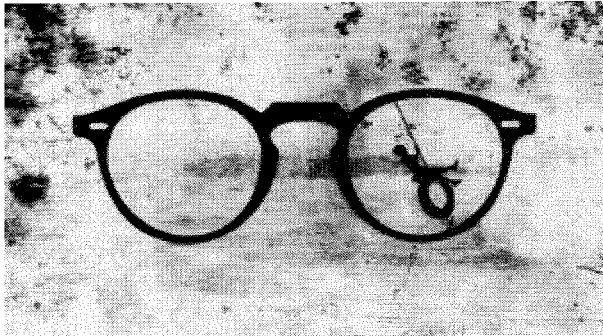
In most of the studies -- which involved more than 3,000 families -- the parents were assessed as well as their kids, and reading aloud appeared to

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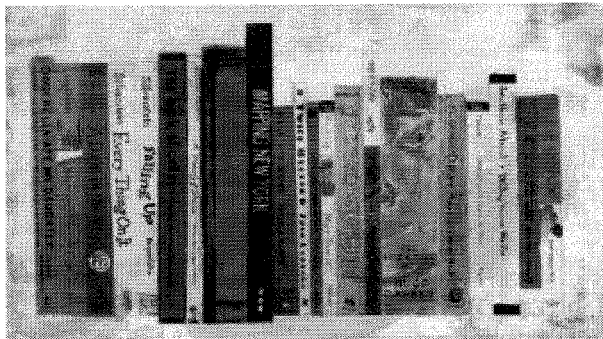
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solving, decision-making) and reduces behavior problems, research shows. As with playing board games, reading to them increases concentration and attention spans. Reading aloud even outperforms conversation when it comes to exposure to vocabulary and advancing a child's literacy.



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and have deep conversations sparked by the novels. It's as high a quality as quality time gets.



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Hinton, J.D. Salinger. Unlike in math, science and English, rarely were students late to my class. I'm not sure how much I did right, but reading to them was a slam dunk.

strengthen parents' feelings of competence, improve the quality of their relationships with their children and even reduce parental stress or depression.

Reading aloud to children improves a young mind's cognitive development (thinking, problem-

And yet, too many of us stop before the kids want us to. In Australia, more than a third of children aged 6 to 11 whose parents had stopped reading to them wanted to continue.

Improving a child's reading skills and cognitive ability is important to their success in school, work and life. "If you are going to get anywhere in life," Roald Dahl is credited with saying, "you have to read a lot of books."

The conversations children have around themes and ideas in books help them make sense of the world. And it's a joyful way to connect and be close with your kid. While reading in bed, my daughters and I lie next to each other, sometimes leaning into one other. We laugh and are surprised together

And because reading aloud is pleasurable, parents and teachers reinforce a child's habit of reading because they create a positive association with it. It's one of the most virtuous circles of parenting and teaching.

My first job out of college was as a middle school reading teacher through the public service program Teach For America. In the first week of school, students told me how pointless my job was, since they could already read. I was inexperienced and underprepared and frequently believed they were right about my pointlessness. But one ritual my students grew to love -- even those who derided it at first -- was how I spent the first 15 minutes of each class reading aloud to them. I read Stephen King short stories, S.E.

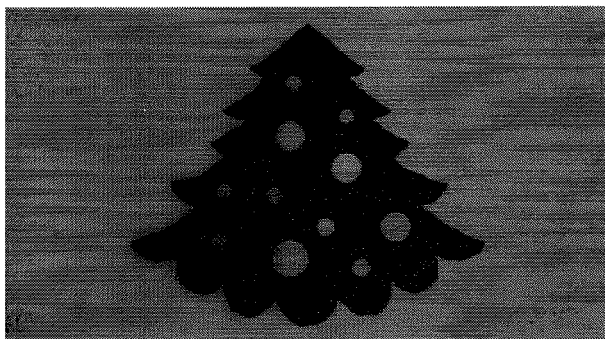
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## Ritualizing book reading, or even bringing it back

Turning book reading into a ritual is as simple as repetition paired with a certain time or situation. Reading to kids just before bed is popular because routine makes for easier bedtimes as well -- a twofer!

Once they're hooked, however, don't threaten to take it away as a punishment. There was a brief time where my wife and I would leverage the loss of reading time as a way to cajole cooperation with bedtime routines. We threatened it because we knew they cared about it. But it always felt wrong and counterproductive to us, like punishing them by not serving a favorite vegetable at dinner. We want to read to them as much as they want to be read to. So we knocked it off.



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I have a couple of these, including Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird" and Betty Smith's "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn." For my wife, it was Scott O'Dell's "Island of the Blue Dolphins" and Elizabeth George Speare's "The Witch of Blackbird Pond."

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ended. But I won't regret that I didn't get as much quality time as I could with them and the books we collectively love.

If you've stopped reading to your kids and it feels like that era is over, don't close the book on it forever. Try to bring it back. Maybe don't make it a ritual, in this case. Ask whether you can read them something short (maybe funny too) as one-offs. Try to sneak it in. Maybe wait until they're sick and read them the book they're reading to themselves for pleasure or school.

Or model reading to your partner and point out that, as my daughter put it, "Everyone likes to be read to." Reading aloud to another is like a personal audiobook! Nothing baby-ish about that. In fact, it's how my wife falls asleep many nights.

Or ask for a single exception -- one book you have your heart set on reading to them above all others.

When my daughter asked to stop being read to two years ago, I asked whether we could make one exception for a book I wanted to read to her if she ever got sick enough to miss a couple of days of school. The book was William Goldman's "The Princess Bride," and we read it last year, starting when she was down with a 24-hour bug. Sharing the book was as magical as I'd hoped.

When my daughters tell me it's time to really stop reading to them, I will be sad that chapter has